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ARGUMENTUM

On October 4th, 2010, Professor Mauro Calise
from the University of Naples Federico II was awarded
the *doctor honoris causa* degree of the University of Bucharest.
His *lectio* opens this issue of *Studia Politica*.

The Personalization of Power

MAURO CALISE

Prologue

It is not just by a matter of courtesy that I introduce my lecture with the most heartfelt: thank you! Thank you, in the first place, for the high honor you are bestowing on me, an honor I do not believe to deserve but that I do very much welcome. And thank you for the extraordinary opportunity to discuss with you on a topic so challenging for political science, a topic which is so relevant that it has already gained the status of a taboo. Something we all know is so important that we hardly dare to speak about it. The topic of my lecture today is the personalization of politics. It is one of the oldest topics in politics, as power – as will shall see – is born with the brand and cast of the person to whom it belongs. And, for many centuries, power remains a personal belonging. In fact the rise of modernity can well be said to coincide with the secularization of power, turning power from an individual affair into a collective enterprise.

The advent of the modern state signals the emancipation of politics from its individual roots. To the point that the 20th century will be defined, through the Weberian typology, as the triumph of the legal-rational authority. Personal power, be it patrimonial or charismatic, seemed to be confined into the marginal regions of backwards, non-democratic regimes. This was the picture you would have found in all political science textbooks when dealing with the nature of power until a few years ago. Actually, this is the picture you are most likely to find even today¹, in spite of the fact that we all know what we all see around us everyday, in every institutional corner of political life: personal power is back, power is turning personal again. You know this, we all know this. Yet, you hear little about it. Because personal power is a taboo to academic political science. It forces us to reconsider many of our basic assumptions. It shakes the very foundations of orthodox democratic theory. As Noelle Neuman would say, personal power is a hostage to the spiral of silence of civilized public opinion. So, what a better occasion than this to cut into this spiral, to break the curtain of silence and – as my friend and mentor Theodore Lowi would say – speak the truth to power. The new century and, for that matter, the new millennium is one where personal power will dictate new rules and new directions. There is a wild and unpredictable frontier waiting for us to discover.

Yet, to better understand where we are heading, we need to start from the very beginning: from our political ancestors. Contemporary personal power, much as it is bringing along a good deal of innovations, does also, to a large extent, carry the

¹ A search in Jstor, or several other social science databanks, for the keyword *personal*, *personal power*, *personal politics* brings up very few items, mostly related to developing countries. A major exception is the seminal work by Gunther ROTH, *Politische Herrschaft und persönliche Freiheit. Heidelberger Max Weber-Vorlesungen 1983, Part I: Charisma und Patrimonialismus Heute*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1981.

stigma of its primordial cast. However, not to abuse of your patience, I'll fly as quickly as possible over the last ten centuries, to then be able to concentrate my analysis upon the most recent trends. The journey is then going to be pretty rough. Fasten your seat belts, and welcome aboard.

Collective

Immortality is a divine gift. It marks the distance between heaven and earth, as well as its endless boundary. A man's search beyond himself is a search for eternal life. This quest and this promise are the foundations of most religions: keeping the abyss between these two worlds while, at the same time, cultivating the hope that the abyss can be replenished. Life is born again from ashes *ad aeternum* thanks to the miracle of faith.

In their struggle against death, men are all equal. Wealth will be of no help in undertaking the final journey: "The last will be first, and the first will be last" (Mathew, 19:30). There have been times, in history, when churches offered the richest a discount on Paradise ticket. But even the *sale of indulgences* by professional "pardoners" didn't change the inexorable fate that every man, to be born again, first had to die. Immortality is a privilege of God.

The body of the powerful is no exception to caducity. The accumulation of power – all kinds of power – finds its limit in the end of the earthly life. Yet, the certainty of death also becomes an incentive to fully exploit personal power, as it leaves a man with no alternative. Power is *hic et nunc*, here and now, a physical or financial resource which is bound to grow with the person who owns it. It belongs to each person's life-cycle, depends upon that person's vitality. For many centuries power has been nurtured through its symbiosis with the person to whom power belongs.

This is also the reason why personal power is so closely protected and guarded from all sorts of dangers – and evils. The sacred nature of the sovereign serves as a defense against the extreme frailty of his body. In the feudal system, the transfer of power is strictly regulated by norms which emphasize the presence of the lord and his servant, as well as the rituals underscoring the personal linkages among giver and taker. Yet, as soon as the physical or military strength declines, the struggle for succession prevails over all sorts of pacts or oath. The rule is that every chief carries his own power into his tomb.

Personal power is thus, by its own nature, highly unstable, unpredictable and cannot be accumulated much beyond the limitations dictated by a human life-span. This is the impasse which best explains the main characters of pre-modern politics: its extreme fragmentation and uncertainty, from the smallest and most dispersed fief to the higher echelons of the everlasting – and never resolving – struggle between popes and emperor. The solution to this impasse will be offered by the invention of the political body. That is, the construction of a political actor which can operate, and reproduce itself, beyond the individual sphere. The English language identifies this body with the self-revealing term of *corporation*¹. A body turned into an institution.

¹ On the origins of the concept of corporation, see Mauro CALISE, "Corporate Authority in a Long-term Comparative Perspective – Differences in Institutional Change between Europe and the United States", *Beihefte zur Rechts-theorie*, Supplements to Legal Theory, Duncker &

In its original formulation and use, the corporation stands for the possibility of separating power from individuals, regulating it by legal rules and perpetuating it across time. Through the concept of corporation, political authority can be moved away from the personal linkages of the feudal society and is asserted as a collective responsibility. The best representation of such a pivotal transformation is offered by Ernst Kantorowicz's metaphor of the "king's two bodies", in his seminal study on the rise of an abstract and impersonal political body which becomes the alter ego of the living king, and a survivor to the king's natural death¹. The King as a corporation becomes immortal: "The King is dead. Long live the King".

I shall not go here into any details in reconstructing the evolution of the king's second body. You are all familiar with it, as it is the history of the modern state: the advent of a public sphere administered through the impersonal command of a bureaucratic machine. This pattern of impersonal, collective authority has become the dominant pattern of political systems in the 20th century in Europe and the United States, as well as a model for all developing countries. And has long been considered as the one and only possible way any political system could go in order to face the challenges of modernization. There could be variants, as between the Soviet collectivistic state and the North-Atlantic liberal state. However, all variants had to rely on the state's bureaucratic machinery and its line of impersonal power if they were to cope with the one basic requisite of mass politics and mass industrial growth: the requisite of predictability, and of a rational calculation of costs, benefits, risks and interests under the firm protection of a stable law enforcement system. Whatever may be its variants, impersonal power has been the dominant factor in the organization of political life all through the century that is behind us.

Today, this is no more the case. And the task of the second part of my lecture will be to go over a very sketchy description of the rise of personal power in several junctures and domains of contemporary democracies².

Personal

Personalization has become extremely relevant both in the bottom-up and in the top-down spheres of the governmental process. That is, it concerns the electoral arena as well as the executive sphere, and, perhaps most important, has deeply affected the organization and role of political parties, which serve as a key link between state and society.

Let's begin with the rise of candidate centered electoral campaigning, where media have taken the place of parties as the main intermediary between candidates

Humblot, 2002 and the entry "Corporation", in Mauro CALISE, Theodore J. LOWI, *Hyperpolitics. An Interactive Dictionary of Political Science Concepts*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010 and www.hyperpolitics.net. A landmark text on the legal environment where the concept of corporation was nurtured is Harold J. BERMAN, *Law and Revolution. The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1983.

¹ Ernst KANTOROWICZ, *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1981.

² For a preliminary insight, see Ian McALLISTER, "The Personalization of Politics", in Russell J. DALTON, Hans-Dieter KLINGEMANN (eds.), *Political Behavior*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007.

and their constituencies. Candidates today use media to reach out for voters, rather than relying on traditional party channels. Media are much more flexible, can very rapidly give access to large constituencies, the more so if campaign strategists can use the proper mix of traditional media – as newspapers and TV – and the new media, as Internet. The rise of candidate centered and media based electoral campaigning has brought about two consequences. One is a matter of language, the new communication approach necessary to best exploit the media logic, with its focus on individual personalities. All contents and proposals must be vehicled through the candidates, their media images and TV performances. The second main consequence concerns fund raising, which once mainly worked through party channels and now mostly depends on the candidate's individual ability to collect huge sums of money. Sums which become bigger and bigger with the rising costs of media broadcasting.

Another important arena of political personalization is the strengthening of individual leadership in the executive branch. In all sorts of political regimes, chief executives have gained more power and authority in the running of governmental affairs, both *vis-à-vis* their ministers and the Parliament. Personalization in politics has been defined as a process of presidentialization, as prime ministers in parliamentary democracies can today rely on many of the resources that their American colleagues have available¹. The strengthening of executive power can be seen in the organizational sphere, with the growth and specialization of the prime minister's office, as well as in the normative one, with a good deal of legislation now being handled directly by the government with little if any contribution by the Parliament. In most cases, the emerging of prime ministerial dominance has been achieved without formal constitutional revisions, just through the adoption of ordinary laws and procedures. The result is that the traditional distinction between presidential and parliamentary regimes is nowadays more blurred, and less useful.

Personalization could have hardly gone that far in the electoral and the governmental arena without also invading the link represented by the political party. Through their development as the pillar of democratic regimes, in post world war two era, parties have represented the stronghold of collective responsibility and decision-making. This had led to a system of oligarchic rule, with elites circulation operated through cooptation, a mechanism which tended to reinforce party cohesion as a collective body. The personalization of political parties has dramatically changed the course of party life.

While the trend of party personalization is a general one and concerns democratic as well as non-democratic regimes, it can vary in scope and intensity. In old, established parties the process can be contrasted by the entrenched nomenclature: it took Tony Blair more than a decade to impose his personal leadership on the unions controlled Labor party. Personalization is much quicker and more invasive in the case of new parties, which often are promoted and controlled by individual leaders. Berlusconi's Forza Italia is, perhaps, the most well known case, as it combines a highly professional and extensive use of television with the massive investment of private resources. Berlusconi's model – one he originally borrowed from Texas billionaire Ross Perot – implied direct access to the masses and an emphasis on charismatic personality, a phenomenon later described as media populism.

¹ Thomas POGUNTKE, Paul WEBB, (eds.), *The Presidentialization of Politics. A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005.

Berlusconi's Forza Italia maybe unique in its capacity to bring together the patrimonial, the charismatic and the organizational factors of party personalization, thus becoming the prototype of a new kind of party, the personal party¹. In other cases, only some of these factors may be present. In Italy, as a result of Berlusconi's influence on the political system, there has been a proliferation of smaller personal parties, mainly run by local notables who gain national influence thanks to their strong territorial roots, or by newcomers with a large public opinion following, as it is the case with former prosecutor Antonio Di Pietro who has banked on his muckraking role in the Tangentopoli scandals. Apart from smaller self-made parties, personalization has also strongly influenced larger and well established organizations, as it has been the case with the PD, the major party in the center-left coalition. Here, a once stable oligarchy has had to leave party control in the hands of much more volatile leaders.

Still, what all varieties of personalization have in common is the crucial role of media. Economic or political control of the media has become a decisive factor for the rise of one-man dominated parties with a large popular following, as in the case of Chavez's Venezuela. But media are also determinant in shaping personal politics in established presidential systems, as France and the United States. Obama's extremely rapid career could not be conceived apart from the immense popularity he gained through media coverage, as well as through the innovative use he made of internet to market his program to highly profiled targets and collect donations which were, in turn, used to buy TV advertising.

However, media popularity may quickly take a downward trend. As we have seen with extremely well-received leaders as Barack Obama and Nicolas Sarkozy, it maybe just a matter of months before initial apotheosis be turned into the nightmare of increasingly negative polls. Which leads me to a few concluding remarks about the unintended consequences of the rise of personal politics.

Conclusion

In presenting his typology of power, Max Weber clearly separated personal power from the legal-rational type of legitimate authority. Personal power belonged to the past, modernity would work through legal-rational procedures, structures, and actors. Besides, Weber situated the two types of personal power – patrimonial and charismatic – in different historical and cultural contexts. Quite to the contrary, one of the major characteristics of contemporary personal power is the interaction and cumulation of these two elements. The modern process of personalization of politics results, to a large extent, from the combination of patrimonial and charismatic resources. This combination becomes all the more stronger when it can use – and possibly merge into – the key central institutions of a democratic regime, as it is the case when personalization penetrates political parties and the executive branch.

The result is what Theodore Lowi has defined as "personal presidents"². Leaders who have access to a tremendous amount of resources: financial, communicational, institutional. They do so through legitimate democratic channels, which makes for a

¹ Mauro CALISE, *Il partito personale. I due corpi del leader*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2010 (2000).

² Theodore J. LOWI, *The Personal President: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1985.

clear-cut difference from all sorts of dictators that political systems have experimented in the past. And they may enjoy extraordinary levels of popularity, in what often becomes a direct relationship with the electorate. The amount of personal power a democratic leader can today accumulate is thus unprecedented. Yet – and this is another major departure from authoritarian regimes – the rise of personal power is not the result of a deviation, a deliberate deviation from the ordinary regime. Personalization of politics, much more than an individual choice, has become a structural and systemic element of contemporary politics.

Which brings us to a final, rather uneasy consideration. The subtitle of Lowi's book reads: power invested, promise unfulfilled. The most critical element in the rise of personal presidents is their inability to satisfy the high level of expectations that their populist campaigning has raised in the electorate. The more so as they have to act in a condition of unlimited responsibility. That is, personal presidents today can very little rely on the protection and intermediation of those collective actors which have been the pillars of political development through the past ten centuries. Parliaments, states, parties all partake of the inesorable decline of collective values, ideologies, behaviors. The second body of the king, the most precious construct and achievement of the Western legal tradition, is getting weaker and weaker.

Without the shield of a political body, the king, once again, is naked.